

Homily for opening Mass of the 175th anniversary observance

By Archbishop Jerome Hanus, O.S.B. • November 20, 2011

What do you imagine Bishop Mathias Loras was thinking, one hundred and seventy five years ago?

What do you imagine went through his head when he received the letter from the Pope, appointing him bishop?

He had never heard of Dubuque. Now he is told that Dubuque is a promising town in a vast territory, stretching from the State of Missouri all the way up to the Canadian border?

He learns that there may be about three thousand Catholics in the area, but not a single priest except for the occasional visits of the Dominican missionary, Father Samuel Mazzuchelli. There are no sisters, no deacons, only two church buildings, no schools, no social services and no hospitals.



Archbishop Hanus speaks to the congregation consisting of representatives from all parts of the archdiocese at the 2 p.m. Mass at St. Raphael Cathedral, Dubuque. This was the beginning of the year observing the 175th anniversary of the archdiocese. (Witness photo by Sr. Carol Hoverman)

What do you imagine went through his head, as he sat in Alabama, reading that letter from the Pope? He could have thought: "I should have stayed in France, where I had a comfortable life." Maybe he regretted that he had left his widowed mother and siblings.

Thoughts and feelings like those could have gone through his mind. But they were not controlling for Bishop Loras. He knew in his heart what was important and what was needed.

Bishop Loras wanted to bring Jesus to this vast region, newly established as the Diocese of Dubuque. He wanted the people who would settle and develop Iowa to have the Gospel of Jesus Christ preached to them. He wanted them to accept Jesus Christ as King and the Church as the community in which they would find salvation.

Bishop Loras wanted to make Jesus come alive. Jesus was and is the reason behind what has happened over these one hundred and seventy-five years. Since that is so, it is important that we understand who this Jesus is.

In his own day, Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" (cf. Matthew 16:13). Our Catholic faith answers that question.

Jesus is first of all holy, a spiritual leader. He teaches us to pray to God. He is the great High Priest, offering Himself as a sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. Prayer is primary. That is why Bishop Loras quickly invited the Trappist monks to come to Iowa. How blessed we have been because of the contemplative witness of the Cistercian monks and nuns!

Jesus is secondly the great prophet. He teaches us about the will of God; he teaches us the commandments, especially the love of God in worship and the love of neighbor in social justice.

Jesus is thirdly considered a king or ruler. Today's feast invites us to meditate on this title of Jesus.

What kind of a king is Jesus? Surely he never lived in a palace or dressed in royal robes or wore a jeweled crown. He was poor, born in a stable of Mary his mother. His model of kingship is not that of a powerful figure. He didn't lord it over others, with hundreds of slaves waiting upon him.

The kingship that Jesus lived was rather modeled on the example of a shepherd. We heard about that in the first reading (cf. Ezekiel 34). Jesus is the Good Shepherd who pastures the sheep, seeks out

the lost, brings back the strayed, binds up the injured, and heals the sick (cf. Psalm 23). Jesus is "the good shepherd who gives his life for the sheep" (John 10:11).

That is the kind of Jesus Bishop Loras worked to come alive in the hearts of people. Bishop Loras wanted Jesus to come alive as spiritual and priestly person, as prophet and teacher, and as loving and sacrificial pastor/shepherd.



Bishop Loras knew that he himself was called to extend this mission of Jesus. But he knew he couldn't do it alone. It would happen only if thousands of individuals would be willing to take up and further those roles of Jesus.

So he went back to France and recruited priests and seminarians. Jesus has been alive in this local church because of the ministry of hundreds of priests. We thank them and pray for our current seminarians. We are also grateful that sacramental ministry has been enhanced in recent decades by the ministry of more than a hundred permanent deacons, ably assisted by their wives and families.

Bishop Loras wanted Jesus to be alive as teacher and prophet. Again, he could not do this alone. So he welcomed and supported literally thousands of women religious who became extraordinary teachers in diverse educational institutions. We thank them and also all of those religious who became prophetic witnesses to social justice especially since the 1960s.

We recognize gratefully that the teaching and pastoral work of Jesus has been

continued in recent years by professional laity in our schools and parishes and in our social service agencies like Catholic Charities.

Bishop Loras wanted Jesus to be alive as agent of healing. And so it happened that countless members of the community served as nurses and doctors and health care administrators.

And Bishop Loras surely knew that none of these activities of Jesus would happen if there were not men and women who would enter into stable and fruitful marriages through the Sacrament of Matrimony and raise children imbued with faith and virtue and the diverse human skills that make society possible. So he encouraged the immigration of diverse people and worked hard to make them welcome. We know he would want us to continue this work of Jesus, welcoming immigrants in our day.

So, yes, Jesus has been alive through one hundred and seventy-five years of this archdiocese! Jesus has been alive through each Catholic member of this archdiocese since 1837. Jesus is alive in all of those roles: prophet, priest, king.

In closing, this Feast of Christ the King reminds us that the Second Vatican Council repeatedly challenged us to be: "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people set apart" (I Peter 2:9).

We as Christians are royalty; we are kings and queens, princes and princesses — but not to live in palaces or wear fancy garments and jeweled crowns. We are royal if we make Jesus the King come alive by feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the immigrant and clothing the naked. We are like Christ the King when we visit those in jail and work for peace and justice.

Yes, the task before us is the same as the mission which Bishop Loras accepted in 1837: to take the gifts we have received gratefully and share them generously with others.

By ourselves and on our own strength we cannot do it. But by the power of the Holy Spirit and nourished by the Eucharist, we can do it: we can make Jesus come alive in our day and in the years to come.